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AUTHOR Rosberg, Merilee
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ABSTRACT

The role of sociodramatic play in children's cognitive, social, and physical development is discussed, drawing on observations of work with parents and their children ages 3-5. The paper focuses on the way the teachers guided and facilitated play taking cues from the children. A training session was provided to the parents on ways to play with their children using limited resources. Parent meetings were held once a week while children were in class. Home visits were also conducted. The children attended preschool four mornings a week. During most of the morning they were engaged in guided play activities. It was found that the most valuable learning experiences were when the children engaged in sociodramatic play after the teacher had provided some real-life experiences for them. With guidance, the children became more creative and expanded their interaction and communication with others. The results indicated that the maturity level of all of the children's play improved. They were engaged in more social interactions, problem solving, and group dramatic play. The amount of time spent in sociodramatic play activities also increased as children extended their play. (AA)

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ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

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MERILEE ROSBERG, PH.D.
UNIVERSITY OF BRUNEI
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ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH SOCIO-DRAMATIC PLAY
ABSTRACT

Playfulness is an important characteristic in children and adults. Many people believe that all children know how to play and will do so if we allow them time. Research has shown though that some children begin school and don't know how to play. It is not a natural development for all children.

I worked in the United States in a preschool setting with three and four year olds. Most of the children came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and some were considered "at risk" for being successful in school. Some of the families had very limited parenting skills. They weren't concerned about play opportunities for their children. Their main goal was to survive.

In this presentation I discuss how we worked with parents and their children. We gave parents training in ways to play with their children using limited resources. Parent meetings were held once a week while children were in class. Home visits were also conducted. The children attended preschool four mornings a week. During most of the morning they were engaged in guided play activities. We found that the most valuable learning experiences were when the children engaged in socio-dramatic play after the teacher had provided some real-life experiences for them. This presentation will look at the way the teacher guided and facilitated play taking cues from the children. With guidance, the children became more creative and expanded their interaction and communication with others.

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ENHANCING LEARNING THROUGH SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

A large amount of research has been dedicated to examining play and the importance of play for young children. The notion that children learn through play began with Froebel. He considered play to be the highest level of child development. Children learn concepts, develop social and physical skills, master life situations and practice language processes. Piaget also believed that play helped children to assimilate new information and to make sense of the world.

Brian Sutton-Smith (1971) speaks of four different ways of playing: exploration, testing, imitation, and construction. In exploration children examine objects and situations based on their own experiences. Testing seems to be the child's way of finding out more about what he can do about things. The child may make predictions and test them to see if they're true. In imitation the child models the behavior of someone and pretends to be that person, such as a child who pretends that he is the Father going to work. Finally there is construction or world building where the child puts things together in a creative way to make sense of the world.

In this presentation imitation or sociodramatic play is examined. Sociodramatic play is voluntary social play in which at least two persons use role playing and make believe to imitate situations they have observed. How do children learn to imitate? Should adults intervene to assist children who do not seem to be able to engage in sociodramatic play?

In her studies, Smilansky (1971) found that when you introduce young children to imaginative play, some develop the skill very quickly and others do not. She found that children who have parents who have a positive attitude towards play and who engage in make believe play tend to be able to engage in more complex social dramatic play. It was also discovered that parents of lower socioeconomic circumstances tend to interact less with their children in playful ways. They do not engage in many of the social games such as peek-a-boo. These games seem to be percusors for social dramatic play.

In this presentation I would like to share some observations of work with parents of preschool children, ages three to five. Children were worked with and observed over a twelve week period. There were three classes of children with 16-18 in each group. One class consisted of young three year olds, another had three and four year olds, and the third group was four and five year olds. The children came from families of all difffering socio-economic backgrounds, but the main purpose was to serve children who might be culturally disadvantaged, so the majority of the children came from families considered to be in lower socio-economic circumstances. Most of the parents had completed secondary school but had not completed any post-secondary work. The preschool programme is voluntary and parents pay a fee based on their income. Parents agree to make sure that their child attends on a regular basis and to participate in parent education sessions.

The parent education sessions are structured both to give parents support and to help them to understand more about child development. Parents meet on a weekly basis for about two hours to listen to speakers, share ideas, and make learning games and materials for their child. There are also periodic home visits and a toy lending library. Parents are informed that the preschool staff view education of the child as a joint venture between parents and teachers.

The children attend classes four mornings a week for two-and-a-half hours. There are two trained teachers for each group of 16-18 children. Each classroom also has one or two volunteers either parents of the children or persons from the community who agree to work with the children one or two mornings per week.

Before classes begin in the fall, workshops are held for teachers and volunteers. Workshops combine a little theory with a lot of "hands-on" activities through role play. One of the workshops offered was on sociodramatic play. Role play and discussion were used to show adults positive ways to intervene in children's play.

The class schedule is similar to many other early childhood programmes in that there is time provided for children to engage in free choice play. This time ranges from forty-five minutes to one hour depending on the group and their interest in the activities. One important centre is the area for sociodramatic play. Materials and props in this area change dependent on topics being emphasized and child interest. Some topics of interest have been a hospital,

a shoe store, a restaurant, and a grocery store. Often dramatic play spills out into other areas such as the block centre where children may be building a boat, a car, or a rocket ship.

Intervention by Adults

It was decided that some type of adult intervention was needed to help to facilitate sociodramatic play in the classroom. In the three year old class, either a trained volunteer or a teacher participated in activities with the children in the housekeeping centre on a regular basis. Usually the adult became a participant in the play activity. When a child was observed playing with a baby doll, the adult, in the role of a neighbor or friend, asked questions about the baby such as "what does your baby like to eat?" "My baby loves applesauce."

Actual props such as dishes, cups, plastic food, and empty food containers were used because children in the early stages of sociodramatic play need more concrete objects that they can identify with the real thing. The children and adults spent time manipulating and arranging items. The adult talked out loud and said things such as "Let's see, where should I put these dishes?" "I think I better put the fruit in the refrigerator." "It looks like I need to buy more milk for the baby." Gradually the teachers heard the children making similar comments.

In the four and five year old classroom some of the children were engaging in sociodramatic play, so the teachers decided that they did not need to directly model role playing situations.

The teachers role became that of a "matchmaker." If two children were playing "hospital" and another child was nearby in the block centre playing with a toy ambulance, the teacher might say "Do you want to take your patient to the hospital?" If the child accepted this idea, the teacher went with the child to facilitate interaction among the children.

In other situations the adult helped to extend play when children seemed to be repeating the same actions and conversations over a period of time. At times new props were added to suggest other ideas or the teacher asked appropriate questions to extend the play activity. In this case the teachers role is one of "spectator" commenting from the outside (Griffin, 1982).

Children in all three classes were given plenty of time to engage in role playing. Free choice time lasted about forty-five minutes on a regular basis. Christie and Wadle (1992) found that children need a minimum of thirty minutes if we expect them to develop mature forms of play. Short play periods may cause children to stop dramatizations just after getting started.

Field trips were also used to enhance play experiences. Trips to the grocery store, shoe store, hospital, and even the garbage dump were taken to provide children with common experiences to imitate. After a trip the teacher discussed the experience with the children. If they seemed interested, the teacher initiated discussion on setting up an activity centre in the classroom. After a trip to the shoe store, the three and four year old class decided that they wanted to have a shoe store. The teacher asked

what they might need. They decided that they would need shoes, boxes, something to measure feet and, of course, a cash register. With some adult guidance and modelling, the children spent several weeks playing roles such as cashier, sales person and customer.

Probably one of the most popular trips was to the garbage dump. The three year olds were fasinated with the big trucks and watching them dump the garbage. The block centre was used to simulate the garbage dump. Blocks were stacked on trucks, driven around, and then dumped. At first there wasn't a great deal of conversation but gradually children began to work together and the teachers role was mainly that of "spectator" extending their play as appropriate with questions such as "What type of garbage did you collect today?"

Parent Participation

At all phases of development toward sociodramatic play the parental role is critical (Smilansky, 1971). Parents can influence play by providing conditions to encourage make believe. By modelling behavior patterns in a playful way children learn to imitate these actions.

At parent education sessions, parents were instructed on the value of play for young children. Activities were also planned to involve parents in developing and using play materials. Sessions included making and using puppets, developeing simple games to play with children, and role playing of various situations. Parents enjoyed making the materials and teachers demonstrated ways to use

the puppets to encourage dramatic play.

Periodic home visits were made to talk to parents about the progress of the children and to discuss any concerns that parents might have. The teacher also brought games and children's books for the family to borrow. Part of the session might be spent interacting with children and modelling ways for the parents to tell stories or to play games. Teachers tried to be sensitive to the needs of the families and their culture, so each situation was a little different.

The main goal was to encourage parents to spend some time each day interacting and playing with their children. Parents were shown how they could make a game out of setting the table or sorting the laundry.

It was felt that by talking to the children about everyday experiences and playing simple games, the children would be developing skills that would enable them to make the next step to sociodramatic play. As communication and social interaction skills improved the children would be able to draw upon these skills in sociodramatic play situations.

Conclusions

The results indicated that the maturity level of all of the children's play improved. They were engaged in more social interactions, problem solving and group dramatic play. The amount of time spent in sociodramatic play activities also increased as children extended their play. Children who were already engaging

in sociodramatic play increased their time involved from fifteen minutes to approximately half an hour. Children who had engaged in parallel-dramatic play moved to more social interactions and group-dramatic play. Those who had not engaged in any dramatic play were beginning to use concrete objects to imitate what they had observed on field trips, in the classroom, or at home.

In this particular study a control group was not used, so it is difficult to say how much change was due to maturation and just being with other children. The main goal, however, was to assist children to engage in higher social and cognitive forms of play.

This was achieved through a combination of interventions. By working with parents, they were more apt to engage their children in play activities. The mixed socioeconomic grouping was also beneficial in that children who had more mature levels of play were able to model for others. Teachers had a better understanding of the children's needs based on classroom observation and home visits. This enabled the teachers to intervene more appropriately in the children's play.

This combination of interventions seemed to have a very positive affect on the children's play. Any one intervention would probably have led to some improvement in their level of play, but it was felt that by enlisting the aid of parents, children had more opportunities to engage in sociodramatic play. Experiences at home and school were often coordinated. If a child had a new baby sister, the child would engage in role play of the situation at school. Since the home and school both valued play the children

also viewed it as an important part of life.

Chenfeld (1991) discusses the value of games and make-believe. Through these playful activities children expand their language, enjoy shared learning, and develop positive human relations. When teachers form a partnership with parents and play is valued, the child benefits. Hopefully we as educators will continue to explore ways to encourage and enhance sociodramatic play so that all will benefit.

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